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ABSTRACT

Nineteen states now have some form of compensatory education grants apart from support for exceptional children. Compensatory education is a large part of the urban problem. The suburbs have replaced the cities as educational leaders, not because the cities have stopped trying to educate students, but because of many sociological and economic reasons. There are many ways to provide urban areas with the dollars necessary to buy the services their pupils need, but there are many practical and political problems to overcome. Many indicators point to a decline in the educational influence and political power of urban districts. In order to achieve financial equity for urban schools, educators must (1) furnish political decision-makers with hard facts rather than romanticized notions, (2) realize that cities can no longer depend on their political power to get necessary dollars, and (3) realize that political reaction against social welfare programs for minorities and the poor can hamper the development of quality educational programs in urban areas. (Author/JG)

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FINANCING EQUITY AMONG SCHOOLS IN LARGE CITIES

by Ben C. Hubbard

When a rural citizen talks of equity among schools in large cities, one should be as suspicious of him or her as my neighbors in the foothills of Appalachia were of city dressed revenue agents during the days of prohibition. To try to set aside some of your possible fears, let me briefly tell you from whence I come and at least partially justify my discussion of this topic. I am the Co-Director of the Center for the Study of Educational Finance. Dr. G. Alan Hickrod, who began his national work by reporting to this meeting when it was a committee as a result of his dissertation on School Finance and Urban Ecology, is the Director of the Center and I have to (or put another way--am privileged to) work with him. In 1968 I spent a sabbatical in Baltimore and New York City looking at both their problems and funding. In 1973 I was the chief architect (or as some of my detractors would say--culprit) when Illinois made its massive step toward including compensatory assistance in the general state aid grant. This formula will, when fully funded, add roughly $300,000,000 to general aid, primarily for the poor who in large part live in cities. Despite these opportunities and the experiences of writing the Report of the Urban Studies Subcommittee of the Illinois School Problems Commission, A Study of Urban Education, in 1969 (1) and working with cities in our state since 1964 as the Research Director of the School Problems Commission, I am, as you suspect, a country boy trying to look at a complicated city problem.

The latest information I have seen is that of the Education Commission of the States in their forthcoming publication by Marshal A. Harris, School Finance at a Glance. (2) In their tabulation they suggest that nineteen states have some form of grants for the support of some type of compensatory education apart from support for exceptional children. These specialized grants for compensatory education find a way to bring about someone's idea of equity for the poor and this

EA 008 343

in large measure adjusts the aid to cities. This fact alone warns all of us that the problem is significant. For those of you who have worked in urban centers, you know that compensatory education, or whatever we choose to call it in the next decade, is a large part of the urban problem. If we set out to delineate the problems of urban education that cost extra money above a regular program, we would miss many; but let's try at least for illustrative purposes. As is suggested by Robert O. Bothwell and others in Chapter III of a forthcoming book, the problem of urban school finance has not received much legislative attention until fairly recently. (3) This has probably been true simply because cities have had a sound financial base and have used it to build better programs and to be educational leaders. As the aforementioned authors suggest, the suburbs have replaced the cities as educational leaders, not because the cities have failed to make efforts to educate but because of a host of other sociological and economic reasons.

Some illustrative reasons for a need to consider equity adjustments for urban areas are:

a. A deterioration of many inner cities and with it a decline in property value.

b. The movement of industry from the cities to rural and suburban areas.

c. Excessive high taxes in urban areas for services other than education when compared to other jurisdictions that compete for state dollars for education, thus making it difficult to increase local property or other taxes for education.

d. Excessive social service needs of the type of population that has migrated to cities.

e. Higher cost of living in urban areas.

f. Excessive needs for special high cost education for a large percent of pupils; i.e., special education, vocational education, bi-lingual programs, etc.

g. The cost of long established power position by unions other than in the teaching field; i.e., teamsters, custodians and specialized help.

h. The cost that all old well-established schools with declining enrollments must bear--high average salary, increasing salaries for the same teachers with few or no teachers entering the system with the same thing happening in other areas of employment, increased cost of maintenance of old buildings with few or no new buildings to offset these increasing costs.

There are many ways that it is possible to cause urban areas to have the dollars necessary to buy the services needed for their pupils at the same level as other districts are able to purchase the services needed for their pupils, which is what equity means to me. There are, however, many practical and political problems to be overcome. First, I do not believe equity for urban education is a viable question--the question is equity for all and how can we measure the varying need in some way other than equal dollars. Certainly, in my state of Illinois, the same dollars in Pope County and Chicago will not assure equal education; in fact, it will guarantee just the opposite. Further, we should admit that if we knew what equity was and how to get it for everyone, it would not be politically popular and it might not be affordable. The facts are, however, that constituencies expect politicians to get advantages for them, not equal treatment.

In my judgment, equity is a goal to be sought by those of us who work with state systems despite the pull by many politicians for an advantage. One of our problems, to paraphrase a famous quotation, is that we have found the enemy and it is us. We have done our research on formulas, dollars and averages but we have been measuring much garbage. Not one of us knows what it really costs to compensate for the lack of a family background over a twelve-year school program--if it can be compensated for at all. (4) We have not often combined our speciality of dollar analysis with genuine curriculum experts. We have not determined nearly accurately enough the difference in the cost of teachers living at given social positions in our communities between cities, suburbs and rural areas. Cost of

living, economics (as advanced as its practitioners believe it is) has not been adequately applied to the specific role of education. We know only very roughly the relationship between the cost of educating pupils in vocational education or a regular academic program or between different academic programs. (5) For that matter, there is no definitive cost information between the cost of different grade levels in the same school and the same basic curriculum. We in Illinois weight high school pupils at 1.25, while not weighting any other educational level. Some isolated research suggests that this is not nearly high enough, but other "gut level" arguments say we would not need this if we put more funds into early childhood and elementary education. There is no real evidence that could be conducive for several reasons. Some are afraid to find out, some can't get the money to do the research because it is expensive, others don't want to commit themselves to research that can't be finished this year (or at the earliest, next year), and still others had rather just remain ignorant. Some public schools don't want the extra bother necessary to keep records so these and other questions can be answered. Too many answers that we need in order to create a really equitable system are not known and are not on the research agenda. The relationship between the cost of equitable education for different human beings must be a part of our future plans.

Secondly, the ratio of urban students to the remaining part of the state is crucial since the one man, one vote decision. The number of legislators at least have a high correlation with the number of pupils. Power tactics to just get dollars for urban areas will only work when a majority or near majority of legislators represent the group. The real argument for distributing dollars in some equitable way based on need is more apparent to politicians when they can't just force things to happen. For those of us in the profession the equitable, or the logical approach, appears to be the only legitimate stand we can take.

The third and last problem I want to discuss is with politics. In the second problem, I alluded to majority dominance by cities in some states. We also see in the political scene in America a strong surge by middle America. It is easy to get a majority to agree that welfare is getting too large a share of the pie. It can easily become popular to limit any form of equalizing education for the poor or the minorities. As the problem of how to fund urban education is explored in states where the majority of persons do not live in urban areas and thus a majority of the decisionmakers do not come from the cities, we in the profession had best have more answers than we now have or the middle class majority may well become the dictatorial majority and real problems of minorities as well as urban pupils may well be slighted.

Evidence that the power and influence of urban districts is beginning to ebb can be gathered from several sources. For example, a recently completed study of the Center for the Study of Educational Finance at Illinois State University, which is being reported on another panel at this meeting, will show that both pupil enrollment decline and reduction of teaching staff has been greater in urban districts than in suburban or rural districts in Illinois. (6) Further, that study also indicates that as districts lose pupils, the concentration of poor pupils increases, an hypothesis advanced earlier by Goettel and Firestine. (7) This, in turn, may be but a part of the more general and more controversial "white flight" thesis advanced by the distinguished sociologist, James S. Coleman. (8) All of these matters, in different ways, point to the decline in educational influence and political power of the central cities, and perhaps to urban districts in general. Although I know of no way to rigorously prove the following statement, it makes a good working hypothesis: "Urban school districts have lost power and influence to suburban districts. For that matter, rural districts may have lost power to suburban districts as well."

If we are to finance the schools of large cities so that real equity will be possible, we must, as I have suggested:

a. Get our house in order so that we can furnish the decisionmakers with real facts, not just our romanticized notions.

b. Cities had best not just depend on dollars being sent to them because they are in control of a majority of the legislators. This is already not true in most states and where it is, things are changing.

c. The political moves that you can observe of middle-class Americans being catered to by politicians can result in reduced support for minorities and the poor and in turn hurt the urban area's chance for developing a quality program.

Notes and References

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8. For a continuing debate on "white flight" see the October 1975, February 1976, and March 1976 issues of Phi Delta Kappan.